

# Refiguring Kristeva and Irigaray in the Buddhist Intellectual Tradition

Barbara Morrison, Ph.D.

## Introduction

Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray are both post-structural theoretical feminists who have each published books in which they have sought to explore spirituality from a feminist perspective. The first, *Le Feminin et le Sacre*, contains letters written by Kristeva and was published in French in 1998, then published in English (*The Feminine and the Sacred*) through Columbia University Press in 2001. The second, *Entre Orient et Occident*, was written by Irigaray in French in 1999 and subsequently published in English (*Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*) through Columbia University Press in 2002. The first text consists of a correspondence between Kristeva and Catherine Clement, lasting for about a year; from November of 1996 to October of 1997, in which Kristeva postulates that the “heart of the sacred” lies in a “synthesis...a new syncretism” between the “Chinese people” and her own “Greek or Judeo-Christian tradition” (170). The second text consists of an extensive meditation by Irigaray in which she relies on her Yoga practice to suggest that the practice of breathing might “correspond to the source or the bridge from which to rethink both singularity and community” (12).

## Crossing Borders

Both Kristeva and Irigaray seek the redemption of human kind in a syncretism between Eastern and Western modes of being. Kristeva, with a bachelor's in Chinese, claims to have been drawn to the philosophy of Taoism as practiced in China. Irigaray, after beginning to practice Yoga, uses her breathing practice to conceptualize her thoughts on the state of Western culture. While Kristeva is drawn to China and to a sense of the sacred as developed along a Chinese trajectory, Irigaray is drawn to India and to the philosophy and practice of Yoga as developed along an Indian trajectory. As a feminist thinker as well, I am drawn to Japan and to the practice of Shingon Buddhism as

developed along a Japanese trajectory. Unlike Kristeva, who considered learning the Chinese language “a waste of time...in the face of the ocean of ideograms and wisdom that are so different from our traditions,” I became completely absorbed in the use of Japanese characters and have found the wisdom that is retained in the Buddhist intellectual tradition, particularly with regard to Shingon Buddhism in Japan, as completely accessible and extremely pertinent to my theoretical and practical concerns (168). Just as Irigaray demonstrates the ways in which she has incorporated the practice of breathing into her own body of knowledge, my Buddhist practice has become a part of my intellectual life.

Kristeva discloses to Clement that she has “a hunger for Chinese sacredness, composed of sexual duality, of the establishment of action, and of an efficacy that draws its strength from the void” and that she “tried to learn Chinese once in an attempt to accede to that sacred” because she “liked that taste, bland perhaps but very subtle, of the sacred: so far removed from that other so-called sacred that cuts the throats of men and women as if they were sheep” (168). Kristeva relates to Clement that she “even managed to earn my bachelor’s degree in it” and went to China with the *Tel Quel* group where she once again was “seduced by the serene maturity of Chinese women...and disappointed by the national Communism that was challenging the Stalinist model but still followed it intrinsically” (170). As her “own history became mixed up in all that” ... she ... “turned her back on politics. Hence psychoanalysis, the novel, and the rest” (170). Kristeva goes on to “admit that, in the long history of ‘sacreds,’ I allow myself to be seduced first and foremost by the flavors of the Tao, which, as everyone knows, suits a sage reconciled with the mother and with nature, ‘the one who alone is nourished by the mother,’ and who has nothing to defy or to demonstrate or to prove...” (168).

While Kristeva touches upon her regard for China and Chinese thought and does so rather impressionistically, Irigaray uses her trip to India and her encounter with Yoga to completely rethink her perspective on Western culture and to consider the global possibilities for an evolution of human consciousness. Irigaray begins by noting a cultural crisis in which “the Western subject has come to a standstill at a moment in his journey” (xi).

In elucidating the nature of this crisis, Irigaray calls attention to the decline of humanity and locates this decline at a point where “Western man has above all failed to recognize and has neglected that which, it seems to me, should characterize his species: the ability to enter into relation with the other without reducing this relation to the satisfaction of instincts, of needs” (ix). According to Irigaray, this state of affairs has come to be through a process of differentiation through which the West has alienated man from his own nature, and abstracted his subjectivity from the “sensible-intelligible and corporeal-spiritual dichotomies” to a realm that is “too exclusively mental” (5). In her own “personal renaissance,” Irigaray began by “learning again to breathe, naively at first and then with the aid of masters from the East, or trained in the East”...and was able ... “to glimpse the existence of another life, not in the beyond, but here below. It was possible to live altogether otherwise than I had been taught, than what I could examine” (6). It is on the basis of this fundamental realignment that Irigaray begins her meditation on a possible evolution of human consciousness through a transcendence of the Western subject as constituted by “mediations proper to the masculine subject,” toward a world in which “each of us no longer resembles a hunter of the absolute at war with every other but becomes the humble builder of a human interiority” (101).

### **Thinking Through Eastern Practice**

What is the nature of this coincidence between two leading post-structural theoretical feminists and such diverse Eastern traditions as Taoism and Yoga? Curiously, neither of these two intellectuals locates the nexus of their encounter with these traditions through the dynamic of an intellectual engagement. Kristeva notes her attraction to “these charming Asians” without providing us with any further textual justification than her own intuition (170). Irigaray explores her own embodied experience through the practice of breathing, but her encounter with the East, just as with Kristeva, remains tantalizingly elusive, and on the fringes of what we might call a rigorous process of intellectual engagement.

Westerners, on first encountering the “East” often ascribe to the “Orient” that which he or she feels is lacking in her own culture. Irigaray’s insistent returning to the body, to the practice of breathing and to the presence of the corporeal in her encounter with the

“East” strikes me as is dangerously close to exoticizing the “East,” and to ascribing to the “East” an emphasis on the corporeal at the expense of the intellectual only because it is the corporeal that one feels is lacking in one’s own (Western) culture. While Buddhism (as an “Eastern” practice) is certainly corporeal in so far as breathing and meditation are considered to be the axis of Buddhist meditation, there is also a rigorous, if not ferocious, intellectual tradition in Buddhist thought which dates from its inception in India in approximately 500 BCE. The Buddhist intellectual tradition may have reached its apogee in the first to second century CE with the scholarship of Nagarjuna (circa 150-250 CE) and his founding of the Mādhyamika (Doctrine of the Middle Position) School. This intellectual vigor continued to sustain itself through the establishment of the Yogācāra (The Way of Yoga) School [also known as Vijnānavāda school (Doctrine of Consciousness)] by Asanga and his brother, Vasubandhu, in the fourth or fifth century CE.

With regard to Buddhism and to the various cultural manifestations of Buddhism in Eastern countries such as India, China and Japan, there is a rigorous intellect at work, a radical questioning of being which reaches to the very core of what constitutes a human subject and that subject’s position in the cosmos. This dynamic of questioning is not so far removed from the Western notion of the Socratic method. The insight achieved through radical questioning is encapsulated in Buddhist thought under the rubric of wisdom. However, and in contradistinction to a purely intellectual pursuit of knowledge, Buddhism also asserts the concurrent need for compassionate action. Indeed, within the Buddhist paradigm, the practice of wisdom will inevitably lead to the development of compassion and the practice of compassion will necessarily lead to wisdom. The mind/body (rational/emotional) dichotomy, so peculiar to Post- enlightenment thinking in the West, is not to be found in Buddhist thought; the mind thinks through the body and the body gives form to the mind.

Kristeva intuits the dynamic of this relationship when she notes that the sacred lies in what the Chinese say, and “Chinese women ‘say’...body and soul: coupled” (170). Irigaray complains that in her Western experience “the body is no longer educated to develop its perceptions spiritually, but to detach itself from the sensible for a more

abstract, more speculative, more sociological culture,” and that Yoga brought her “back to this taste with texts that leads me from the innocence of sensations to a spiritual elaboration that permits their development, and sometimes their communication or sharing” (56).

### **An Intellectual Encounter with Eastern Thought**

An intellectual engagement with Eastern practice (here Buddhist) might begin, first and foremost, with the notion of the Twelve Linked Chain of Dependent Origination, also known as Conditioned Genesis, or as Conditioned Arising (*paticca-samuppāda*). The key sources for *paticca-samuppāda* are two Indian texts: the *Nidāna Samyutta* and the *Mahā-nidāna Sutta*. As feminist thinkers, Kristeva and Irigaray might find this concept of Dependent Origination to be profoundly relational, and fully interpenetrated with their feminist thinking. To fully appreciate and to understand the dynamic inherent in this Buddhist concept of Dependent Origination is to reaffirm Irigaray’s intuition that her insights gleaned from Yogic practice provide a model for: 1) “restoring certain relations between feminine aboriginal cultures and patriarchalized Indo-European cultures, aiming not toward a reversal of power but a possible coexistence of perspectives, of subjectivity’s, of worlds, of cultures,” and 2) “the constitution of horizontal relations between the sexes” (15).

From a Buddhist perspective nothing in the world is absolute. According to the Doctrine of Dependent Origination, everything is conditioned; relative; and interdependent. Nothing exists in vertical relation to anything else; everything exists in horizontal relation to everything else. Irigaray appears to appropriate this Buddhist dynamic in her discourse on the politics of sexual difference when she notes that “difference is not preserved by a vertical transcendence, but thanks to the horizontal transcendence as irreducible to me, to mine” (102). As a result “the objectivity of an unsurpassable difference will always be opposed to the domination of a consciousness” (98).

Buddhist thought elucidates the reason for this interrelatedness on a cosmological plane by articulating the twelve ‘links’ of Dependent Origination as a ‘chain’ through

which we as humans engage in ontological being. The links in the chain are described as follows:

1) Through ignorance are conditioned volitional actions or karma-formations, 2) Through volitional actions is conditioned consciousness, 3) Through consciousness are conditioned mental and physical phenomena, 4) Through mental and physical phenomena are conditioned the six faculties (i.e., five physical sense organs and mind), 5) Through the six faculties is conditioned (sensorial and mental) contact, 6) Through (sensorial and mental) contact is conditioned sensation, 7) Through sensation is conditioned desire, ‘thirst’, 8) Through desire (‘thirst’) is conditioned clinging, 9) Through clinging is conditioned the process of becoming, 10) Through the process of becoming is conditioned birth, 11) through birth are conditioned, 12) decay, death, lamentation, pain, etc. (Rahula 53-54).

Wisdom, (i.e. the cessation of ignorance) results in the reversal of this process and in the cessation of suffering, pain, lamentation and death. Compassion for others, (i.e. the desire to stop decay, death, lamentation and pain) will also motivate a reversal in this wheel of becoming. Access to salvatory powers are granted and obtained through *both* an intellectual (cessation of ignorance or wisdom) *and* an emotional engagement (compassionate care for others) with Buddhist practice.

Irigaray is well within the paradigm of Buddhist thought when she discusses her philosophy of sexual difference in her claims that “men and women forget the mystery of their difference, they reduce it to a corporeal particularity useful for the production of an orgasm and of a child” (84). The mystery and the spiritualization of this ‘mystery’ to which Irigaray refers and that she has located in Yoga through her breathing practice; the space, gap, interval, or lacunae, or the nothingness (無) through and in which difference is located, is (from a Buddhist perspective) that which holds and supports difference; i.e. void. To ‘forget’ (as Irigaray puts it) that mystery (nothingness or void) which sustains difference is to remain in ignorance (and suffering). The spiritualization of that difference and the spiritualization of emptiness has been the intellectual/emotional trajectory of Buddhist thought since its very inception.

The notion of an independent, unconditioned soul or self (Irigaray's "corporeal particularity") is absent from Buddhist thought, for there is nothing (according to Buddhism) that can be absolutely free (physical or mental) since everything is interdependent and relative. This does not mean that one can't talk about a "self," as Buddhism does distinguish between conventional truth and ultimate truth. To talk about 'I,' about 'you,' about the self and subjectivity is not to lie, but to conform to the conventions of the world as we know it. From a Buddhist perspective, the use of these categories of selfhood is provisional, and recognized as such. Irigaray addresses her intuition of an understanding of the Twelve Linked Chain of Dependent Origination in phenomenological terms when she remarks:

It is necessary to learn to think without centering on the object, for example, to think in a living and free manner, unattached, neither egological nor possessive. This does not mean not thinking but being capable of going beyond the inertias of thought in order to set its energy free. Is this not the path shown by Buddha and, in our age, in his own way, by Krishnamurti? (67).

According to Jacques Lacan, the recognition that one has no ego and that there is only an ego *ideal* is at once "irreducible, traumatic, non-meaning" (Lacan 251). That this recognition of one's self as inherently empty should produce anxiety and trauma is the product of a singularly masculinized (here Western) intelligence. Irigaray refers to this state of affairs as one of many "egological confusions," for the cosmic nature of the human body is always enacted in the articulation "of a continuity between the present and immortality or eternity" (30-1). To perceive the self as a bounded totality is to perceive oneself in the present as discontinuous with time, as dislocated, and as ruptured from the continuity of the micro and macrocosm.

In contradistinction to Lacan, Buddhism maintains that it is the belief in an ego construction that is traumatic (not salving), and it is toward this trauma of the Western spirit that both Kristeva and Irigaray are addressing their attentions and concerns. Irigaray speaks of the necessity for each of us to discover a "double subjectivity," a self that is internally in relation with another 'I' (98). She posits that the Western subject has been mediated through relations proper to a unified, masculine subject, as if that notion

were both neutral and universal. Rather, Irigaray feels, “nature as human nature is *two*: masculine and feminine, and that it requires a double subjectivity, a double ‘I,’ in order to be cultivated” (98).

In Buddhism, this notion of self in difference; of self as located in relation, of self as compiled of relations; or as no-self; is known as *anatta* or No-Soul. The need for self-protection and self-preservation is deeply rooted in our animal natures. In the first case human beings (from all positions on the globe) have created the notion of a God figure upon whom they can depend for self-protection, and in the latter case human beings (most notably from the Judeo-Christian tradition) have created the notion of an immortal soul that will live eternally. Such is the nature of mankind’s consolation. Yet both gestures involve a sacrifice; one which Irigaray feels benefits “masculine geneologies” alone and which takes the form of an “ill considered sacrifice of the body and of the universe to a coded and codeable knowledge outside a *present* act, to a truth that is valid in all times and all places” (34).

### **The Bodhisattva as Intellectual**

Buddhism advocates the construction of a pure subject (a notion which Irigaray feels we in the West have lost); a subject that is in constant awareness of his or her own emptiness and of his or her *subjectness* to and in relation to the world. What Kristeva intuited in the Chinese ability to draw strength from the void, and which Irigaray calls difference, is intimately connected with the Buddhist notion of emptiness. In both Yoga and in Buddhist practice this fundamental realization of void, of *sūnyatā* (emptiness), is cultivated experientially through the practice of meditation. The practice of meditation and the consequent experience of emptiness, of *sūnyatā*, is characteristic of the Bodhisattva (one who has differed their entry into Nirvana for the benefit of all sentient beings) and is the product of his or her own meditative insight. To be in a state of universal and continuous communication in relation with the cosmos is imaged in Buddhist thought in the figure of the Bodhisattva, “one who is on the path to perfect Buddhahood, whose task is to compassionately help beings while maturing his or her own wisdom” (Harvey 121). The Bodhisattva’s level of awareness entails a realized understanding (intellectual as well as emotional) that his or her own self is empty, and



that the self of others is equally empty. However, and importantly, this is not to say that others do not experience themselves as suffering beings. The realization of an understanding of the nature of emptiness results in a qualitative change; a shift of orientation that Irigaray appears to have intuited when she grapples with such phrases as “accomplished interiority” (37) and with her assertion that “*we must become gods as men and women*” [her italics] (43). In Buddhism this imperative is developed and refined in the Six Perfections, as a path or the six stages (*pāramitā*) toward becoming a Bodhisattva – one who embodies a series of intellectual (as well as emotional) realizations that culminate not only in a figure for one of the ‘gods’ that Irigaray feels we must become, but also a figure for the redemption of human consciousness.

### **The Feminist Intellect and Buddhist Thought**

How is one to account for this nexus between feminist theory, (Chinese) Taoism, (Indian) Yoga and (Japanese) Buddhism? Irigaray, consciously or unconsciously, is reiterating Buddhist thought in secular terms, and doing so in such a way that is exceedingly appropriate for a feminist thinker. In making the claim that “it is not true that knowledge is indifferent to sex or gender,” (59) Irigaray feels that the subject of Western culture is gendered male, and that, in the West, “the most spiritual becoming proposed then to a woman is that she can also be a man” (54). Eastern meditation, on the other hand, has presented Irigaray with “an awakening to transcendence,” a transcendence which has given her an experience of nothingness (*sūnyatā*) that she then incorporates into her own feminist agenda, wherein the singularity of accomplished interiority (Irigaray’s ‘the being I of a double subjectivity’) can be set in relation to community (the being we) to form a culture of “being(s)-in-relation” (104).

From the point of view of one who is acquainted with Buddhist thought, I think there is perhaps something more going on here than two female scholars engaging in quixotic encounters with the East. Kristeva, and Irigaray in particular, are (consciously or unconsciously) appropriating tenets of Buddhist thought that have been articulated for over two thousand years. As a feminist thinker, it seems to me that there is something congenial about Buddhist thought to feminist thinkers. Western culture has been

concerned with the bodies of men and women in relation to the spiritual in so far as these bodies are constructed as brides of (a male) Christ, as feminized docile bodies ready to receive the active, masculinized ‘word’ which is uttered by a male subject who begot his only ‘son.’ What Irigaray is responding to with her involvement in Yoga practice is an encounter with the feminization of the divine, a feminization that is clearly evident in Buddhist doctrine, most particularly in one of the most revered Buddhist texts, the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*.

### **The Redemptive Powers of a Feminine Intellect**

The *Prajnaparamita Sutra* (prajna=wisdom) is considered to be the originating text for Mahayana Buddhism and to express the “transverbal enlightened reality accessible to the verbally cultivated mind” (Hixon xv). *Prajnaparamita*, as the penultimate sixth stage of the path of the Bodhisattva is gendered feminine. When reading this sutra:

passages suggest that the feminine nature of *Prajnaparamita* is taken seriously by the Sutra. “But this *mother, matrix, guide, power, and bliss of all Buddhas and their embryonic forms, the bodhisattvas* is not simply tender and nurturing in some stereotypical sense of the feminine. Mother Prajnaparamita expresses her *mystic motherhood* equally and perhaps more centrally as the uncompromising discipline of transcendent insight. A union of inexhaustible tenderness and diamond clarity that is like open space radiates from this sutra as the *strong feminine voice of Prajnaparamita, heard directly by all the fully awakened Ones, the humble Lords of Enlightenment*” [his italics] (17).

This feminization of the supreme realization of Buddhist thought conveys a sense of agency to women, no less to Irigaray’s intuition than to my own intellectual endeavors. For those of us in the West who have led a beleaguered life in the realm of theory, attempting to accommodate our hearts and minds to a universalized masculine body of knowledge, the philosophy of the East, and in particular, Buddhist thought, offers us a paradigm for a feminized body of knowledge. Irigaray seems to understand the potential for this feminization of a (divine) spirit when she calls for “the institution of a symbolic world that does not perpetuate an ethical offense toward the feminine ‘I’ and ‘we’” (102).

## Conclusion

If Kristeva's intuition and Irigaray's articulation of the fruits of her practice are any indication, Buddhism, and the secular accommodation of Buddhist thought amidst philosophers, activists and thinkers, may provide a qualitatively new horizon with which to envision the evolution of human consciousness. Irigaray feels that the stakes are high, for if there is not a qualitative (and I would say gendered) shift in the spirit of our age then "this fin de siecle, if it does not mark the entry into another era, risks being nothing but a pitiful decline of the human species..." (Irigaray 145). To realize ourselves (men and women) in relation to one another and to encounter oneself through ones own interiority amidst that relation *in this very body* is a suitable aspiration not only for Shingon Buddhists, but for any sentient being who seeks the redemption of human consciousness in the pursuit of knowledge.

## Works Cited

Clement, Catherine, and Julia Kristeva. *The Feminine and the Sacred*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. New York: CUP, 2001.

Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhism : Teachings, History, and Practices*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Hixon, Lee. *Mother of the Buddhas: Meditation on the Prajnaparamita Sutra*. Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 1993.

Irigaray, Luce. *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*. Trans. Stephan Pluhacek. New York: CUP, 2002.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977.

Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. New York: Grove Press, 1959.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.